



Pick Your Path to Health

Healthy Resolutions for the New Year, One Step at a Time

New Year's resolutions can make a woman feel doomed to failure when they include major lifestyle changes like sticking with a new diet, exercising regularly, or quitting smoking. This year, resolve instead to take just one small step toward a bigger health goal.

One simple step can lead you to many places. If you want to lose weight, for example, resolve to eat smaller portions of food and to walk more during the day. If you want to decrease your risk of heart disease, resolve to take the stairs instead of the elevator once a day. If you want to improve your diet, resolve to drink more water. If you want to quit smoking, resolve to cut down at home or at work. Once you've accomplished the first step, you'll be ready to take the second.

Your objectives are as individual as you are. But keep in mind that heart disease, high cholesterol, extra weight, and lack of exercise are some of the greatest health risks facing African American women. For example, African American women have higher rates of high blood pressure than do white or Hispanic women.

Another risk, diabetes, is 60% more common in African American women than in white women. This condition also plays a role in kidney disease, heart disease, eye and foot problems, and other health complications. Obesity affects more than one-half of all adult African American women, and it can increase a woman's chance of getting heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, respiratory disorders, arthritis, and some cancers. Kidney disease excessively affects African American women, often as a complication of high blood pressure or diabetes. Breast cancer, although more common in white women, more often leads to death in African American women.

To reduce the risk of disease, doctors suggest women be physically active each day; eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, grains, and low-fat foods; practice safe sex; get regular preventative screenings; don't smoke or abuse drugs or alcohol; and use seat belts and safety helmets. You've heard all this before, of course, but this year resolve to take at least one small step towards success.

Whatever health ambition you want to achieve this New Year, remember that finding the strength within yourself—what many people think of as "spirituality"—is perhaps the most important jewel of the season. "African American women can use the New Year as a time of reconnecting with their inner strength to improve their own health, especially after a year of juggling the multiple demands of work, family, and community," says Mary E. Clark, Program Chairperson, Black Women's Agenda, Inc., a research and advocacy group located in Washington, D.C. "It can be a time of reflection; of looking back at the past to learn from it, and looking ahead to the future to shape it." Not only will your personal strength carry you through these first steps to health, but also research shows there may be a link between physical health and spirituality. Some of the evidence shows that meditating or praying, being involved with a church, or discovering other ways to find deeper meaning in life may lessen depression, improve blood pressure, and boost the immune system.

But trying to accomplish too many health objectives at the same time is frustrating and unrealistic. Resolve to start on your path to health with a single step, and before you know it you will be on your way.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.